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Robb Kuczynski

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BOOK REVIEWS

BENCHING JIM CROW: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE COLOR LINE IN SOUTHERN COLLEGE SPORTS, 1890-1980

Charles H. Martin

[Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2010]

357 Pages

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It is hard to miss the number of African-American players on the court or gridiron when one watches college basketball or football. In fact, African-Americans account for 46% of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I football players and 60% of Division I basketball players.¹ However, as recently as sixty-five years ago, African-Americans were banned from playing college athletics at many prestigious universities around the country. This time period between total segregation and total integration in college athletics is the focus of Charles Martin's thorough, yet redundant, new book, *Benching Jim Crow: The Rise and Fall of the Color Line in Southern College Sports, 1890-1980*.²

Martin begins by describing the rise of intercollegiate athletic competition and the "gentleman's agreement."³ In the late 19th century, football and other sports were played at the intramural level on college campuses, but college administrators quickly realized the monetary value and national attention their universities could gain through intercollegiate athletics.⁴ Racial tensions developed, though, when northern universities competed against southern universities. Northern schools accepted black athletes, while southern schools did not. It was, consequently, a clash of cultures. To minimize violence and respect Southern custom, schools initiated the "gentleman's agreement," which Martin defines as a widely shared private understanding where "African Americans would be automatically barred from intersectional matches against southern teams, regardless of the game's location."⁵

1. Richard Lapchick, *The 2009 Racial and Gender Report Card: College Sport*, TIDES, March 11, 2010, http://www.tidesport.org/RGRC/2009/2009_College_Sport_RGRC.pdf

2. CHARLES H. MARTIN, *BENCHING JIM CROW: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE COLOR LINE IN SOUTHERN COLLEGE SPORTS, 1890-1980* (2010).

3. *Id.* at 18.

4. *Id.* at 2-3.

5. *Id.* at 18.

Martin then describes the economic and social reasons for the decline of the gentleman's agreement, the first of which was the Great Depression. It forced many southern schools to re-evaluate the use of the gentleman's agreement.⁶ In short, schools needed money, and southern schools realized the potential revenue competing against prominent segregated teams in the north could generate.

For social reasons, Martin argues that northern college football players had the greatest influence behind the decline of the gentleman's agreement. Under the G.I. Bill, many World War II veterans enrolled in college and played college football. Due to their experiences in war of fighting alongside African-Americans, "those veteran athletes took the lead in defending the right of African Americans to compete on their school's athletic teams."⁷ The veterans, additionally, threatened to cancel trips to the South unless their black teammates were allowed to play.⁸

After discussing and analyzing, in broad strokes, the rise and decline of the gentleman's agreement, Martin spends the rest of his book reviewing, in thorough detail, how each southern college athletic conference integrated its football and basketball teams. Generally, these discussions cover about forty years of history, from post World War II until the early 1980s, when conferences were fully integrated.

He begins his summations of conference integration with Texas Western College and then moves to the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Southwest Conference, and lastly the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Each chapter follows the same formula: an opening story about a significant athletic event in the conference and then subchapters that detail when each school in the conference integrated its teams. Each subchapter is similarly formulaic: a brief history of the school and then a description of the experiences of the first athletes to break the color barrier.

Martin succeeds, however, in the first three chapters where he uses interesting stories to defend his insightful analysis of the rise and fall of the gentleman's agreement. He weaves political, sports, and legal history into a cohesive work, which leaves the reader with an excellent understanding of the factors that led to athletic segregation and its demise. The 1948 Cotton Bowl between Pennsylvania State University and Southern Methodist University is one of his strongest anecdotes.⁹ To show the social impact of the game, Martin uses a quote from the *Christian Science Monitor* that said the game in

6. *Id.* at 32.

7. *Id.* at 57.

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.* at 63.

Dallas “carrie[d] more significance than does a Supreme Court decision against Jim Crowism or would a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act.”¹⁰

Martin provides another interest story when he discusses an early integrated game between a northern and southern school. “The University of North Carolina became the first major southern university to participate in an integrated football game when it challenged NYU in 1936 at the Polo grounds.”¹¹ No racial incidents occurred at the game, and afterwards, a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) ridiculed segregationist fears. Specifically, the NAACP said, “the University of North Carolina is still standing, and none of the young men representing it on the gridiron appears to be any worse off for having spent an afternoon competing against a Negro player.”¹²

His stories are not just for informing. Martin entertains the reader with stories of the first interregional games between southern and northern school, specifically a contest between the University of Virginia and Princeton. He writes, “[t]he University of Virginia eleven learned just how rudimentary its skills were in 1890 when Princeton inflicted a humiliating 115-0 defeat on the southerners.”¹³ Likewise, in an aside regarding the founding of Texas Tech University in 1925, Martin mentions that “[t]he college held its first classes on September 15, 1925, two weeks *after* its new football team had started practicing.”¹⁴

Unfortunately, the anecdotes do not appear as frequently in the second half of the book. Then, the formulaic case studies begin and do not end until the final page is turned. Although the case studies are thorough, well researched, and informative, they lack the cohesive, engaging narrative found in the first half of Martin’s book. No overall theme, other than the fact that schools are located in the same athletic conference, exists between subchapters. Moreover, Martin does not incorporate the same social history into the discussion as he did in the opening chapters. The case studies are limited to the athletic history of each school. Even when Martin does bring up an important social issue, he ignores the opportunity to explore the controversy, leaving the reader with more questions than answers.

Throughout the book, for example, Martin makes numerous references to the fact that NCAA Standardized Aptitude Test requirements “had become a barrier for those coaches who genuinely wished to recruit African-

10. *Id.* at 64.

11. *Id.* at 32.

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.* at 15.

14. *Id.* at 36.

Americans.”¹⁵ However, Martin never discusses why a barrier existed. A brief discussion about the conditions of southern school systems would have helped explain the challenges that NCAA coaches faced when recruiting African American athletes.

Also, for a book with Jim Crow in the title, Martin provides surprisingly little legal discussion. The law is always in the background, but never the foreground, of his discussion. He defines Jim Crow laws generally as the exclusion or segregation of African-Americans but never discusses whether the laws are enforced judicially, legislatively, or socially. He also does not spend more than a few paragraphs discussing landmark Supreme Court cases like *Plessy v. Ferguson* or *Brown v. Board of Education*. In fact, sometimes, he even goes out of his way to minimize the importance of law, like his quote from a newspaper that says college football games have more social impact than Supreme Court cases.¹⁶ To Martin’s credit, though, his book is not supposed to be a legal publication. It is, primarily, an academic chronicle of southern college sports history. His intended readers are not lawyers but, rather, history professors with an interest in sports or sports fans with avid interest in history.

Indeed, the second half of the book is filled with nuggets of college basketball and football trivia. The trivia interest, however, eventually degrades, and discussions about college basketball and football players from the forties and fifties become dull and repetitive. Unless a person has a unique interest in a particular southern college athletic conference, it is unnecessary to read every chapter of the case studies. The repetition is so engrained that one can skip around or read every other chapter and still come away with an excellent understanding of the challenges of college athletic integration in the South. If one does decide to pick and choose, the best chapters to read are about Texas Western University and SEC football.

The Texas Western chapter is worth reading for its discussion on the school defeating Kentucky in the NCAA basketball finals in 1966.¹⁷ Here, Martin includes interesting stories on major personalities like Don Haskins and Adolph Rupp and also a thoughtful analysis on the impact the event had on Southern culture.

Likewise, the SEC football chapter is worth reading for its discussion on the conference’s reluctance to integrate.¹⁸ In essence, Martin’s argument is

15. *Id.* at 219.

16. The game “carrie[d] more significance than does a Supreme Court decision against Jim Crowism or would a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act.” *Id.* at 64.

17. *Id.* at 90-119.

18. *Id.* at 255-291.

that football coaches were the most conservative minded coaches in athletics and the Deep South, which is where SEC teams were located, was most conservative region in the country. This conservative combination meant SEC football teams were especially resistant to integration, and that stubbornness makes the chapter so enjoyable to read.

In all, *Benching Jim Crow* is a detailed account of integration in southern college sports. Martin is at his best when he uses entertaining anecdotes to illustrate the complex relationship between college sports and Jim Crow laws. The book's weaknesses come from detailing outcomes of old college football and basketball games to maintain the reader's interest throughout. Ultimately, the book succeeds as a chronological history of integration in southern college sports but fails as anything more profound.

Robb Kuczynski